the end products of this effort "simple, practical, and understandable" for everyone.

The goals of the Yellow River Initiative are:

1. to assess the natural resources within the Yellow River watershed, based on existing information, and determine their extent, distribution, and condition;
2. to identify, in light of the assessment, possible options to promote the long-term sustainability of the watershed's natural resources; and
3. to develop an Internet-based "toolbox" of technical assistance information, "hotlinks" to appropriate existing resource sites, and contacts to help the public implement these options.

Scientific data and other information are now being gathered from partners, regional universities, and other sources to support watershed resource analysis and the creation of the technical assistance Internet-based "toolbox." In addition, informal, public open-house meetings have been, and will continue to be, held within the watershed to develop details of the initiative, answer questions, provide opportunities for partnership interactions, and generally encourage public participation in and contributions to the project.

To promote local leadership and ongoing local control of the initiative and its work, a Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) office within the watershed has been identified as the potential long-term local coordinator after the initiative's two-year development is completed in early 2005. The National Park Service will continue to provide administrative coordination during the project's initial development. The RC&D would then take over coordination, providing information and guidance to assist individuals, landowners, and organizations in promoting voluntary implementation of long-term natural resource stewardship options within the watershed.

"The Yellow River watershed is located in northeastern Iowa's unglaciated 'driftless area.'"

At the end of its two-year developmental period, the initiative is expected to result in:

1. development of a methodology that can be applied to other small watersheds;
2. benefits to local residents by providing them with information, including completion of the Internet "toolbox," so that they feel empowered to be effective stewards; and
3. establishment of voluntary relationships among stakeholders, to promote stewardship of the watershed's natural resources.

Ultimately, the National Park Service hopes that the Yellow River Initiative will be a practical model for developing local leadership in stewarding a watershed to sustain the health and vitality of its natural resources and its human community. ■

john_sowl@nps.gov
Landscape Ecologist, Midwest Region; Omaha, Nebraska

Web-based communication system eases public review of environmental planning

By Jacob Hoogland

Web-based computer applications have become an essential part of park management. They aid in a variety of important functions, from financial planning and procurement to research permitting and biodiversity inventorying. In addition, nongovernmental organizations and members of the public are making use of Web-based communications (including e-mail) to scrutinize and comment on activities of the National Park Service. Recognizing that these tools could be used to simplify and "automate" the public review of environmental impact statements and other environmental planning documents required by the National Environmental Policy Act and related statutes, the National Park Service initiated a needs assessment in 2000 to determine how best to harness the Internet to meet these obligations. The results of the assessment were used to develop the Planning, Environment, and Public Comment (PEPC) system.

PEPC is an online collaborative tool designed to support project planning; public comment tracking, analysis, and response; and other public communication efforts. The system was developed in collaboration with park, regional, and other NPS experts working with specialists from Aquilent, a leading provider of Internet solutions for government. The system consists of both internal and external components. The internal system allows NPS employees to track public review milestones, prepare routine documentation and reports online, easily post documents to the Internet, and manage public comments and NPS responses in a paperless environment. The external component of the system enables the public to determine the status of various environmental planning documents, download copies of these documents, and return comments to the National Park Service.

PEPC is modeled after a system developed by Blue Ridge National Parkway staff. The park initiated the precursor system to integrate facility planning with compliance to avoid delays in funding and construction.

The PEPC system was tested with a group of park users in 2003 and modified to provide additional features. Pilot park testing is scheduled to begin early in 2004, with nationwide use of the system available later in the year. ■

jacob_hoogland@nps.gov
Chief, Environmental Quality Division; Washington, D.C.